
The Principle of Coherence

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"That is what this searcher suspects, from what he has learned today—and as a teacher of English, as well as a Private Eye, I say it's a sad commentary on adults when they deprive children of the stimulating experience of writing about things that are new and exciting.

"Wouldn't it have been just as easy and much more rewarding to all if the conductors of the tour said to the youngsters at each writing session: 'How did you feel when you stared down into the Grand Canyon?' 'Remember your experience swimming in the Great Salt Lake—your parents

will get a good laugh out of that!' 'What did you and the bear have to say to one another in Yellowstone National Park?'

"Give children a little stimulation such as that—and they'll be happy to write and they'll write individual, colorful, meaningful messages, instead of impersonal, standardized messages fit for all occasions—but really fit for none!"

"You know something?" my wife declared, after listening quietly to my speech.

"What?"

"You're right."

No man needs more proof than that.



The Principle of Coherence

The minimum condition for survival as an independent human being is coherence. The child moves—as he grows up or if he grows up—from the chaos of infancy, through the clamor of childhood and the confusion of adolescence, to the relative coherence of adult life. The fact that even adult coherence is partial and precarious does not detract from the point. Indeed, this melancholy recognition reinforces the point by informing us of what we already know: that few adults have been allowed to any sensible degree to grow up. . . .

Just as there is a minimum condition for the survival of the person as a person, so there is a minimum condition for the survival of a society as a society. That condition is cohesion, also a principle of belonging together, but now as between people rather than within one person. It is just as easy—and twice as dangerous—to interpret the principle of needed social cohesion mechanically, so that it is held to mean that, to achieve "social solidarity," everyone must be taught or brought to think alike to a degree of particularity that would require a propaganda mill instead of a school to achieve

But in our eagerness to throw out the totalitarian bath, there is every danger that we also toss out the democratic baby or, at least, the conditions for its

survival, if one may mix a metaphor. It is necessary to the very notion of democracy, strange as it may sound, that everybody (or nearly everybody) think alike—in a limited number of vital respects. The emphasis must fall with about equal weight on two words: *limited* and *vital*. As we move away from the demand or expectation that persons must agree in only a limited number of ways, we move toward a blatant dictatorship of power or toward a more subtle dictatorship of a conformist mass society. As we move away from vital—we could say vigorous, committed, dedicated—support for these few overarching universal agreements, democracy ceases to survive because its undoubted strains are not compensated by perceived and deeply felt rewards.

It is only when we take these views of the child and society together that the seeming conflict between the principles of coherence and cohesion, between the interests of person and group, of the one and the many, can be at all resolved. For it is only this kind of society that can give a place to the principle of coherence; and it is only on the basis of coherence that the kind of society that permits and encourages it—that requires limited but devoted agreement—can be duly appreciated.—JOHN R. SEELEY in the *School Review*.